

**PHENOMENAL  
NATURE**

**MINALINI  
MUKHERJEE**

Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949–2015) was a committed sculptor who worked intensively with fiber before making significant forays into ceramic and bronze toward the latter half of her forty-year career. She was among a group of post-independence Indian artists who untethered their practice from the then-dominant tradition of figure painting. While nonrepresentational forms of fiber art emerged in the West in the 1960s and 1970s, Mukherjee was never part of that movement. She worked instead in near isolation in India, and chose to integrate craft techniques with a modernist visual vocabulary.

Mukherjee's abiding interest in nature and her knowledge of Indian sculpture, folk art, modern design, and local crafts and textiles underlie her sculptural expression. The diverse references that populate her imagery go well beyond the illustrative and explore the divide between figuration and abstraction. Using an intuitive, laborious process of working with her hands, Mukherjee created unusual, mysterious, sexual, and, at times, grotesque and unsettling forms. These are commanding in presence and scale and resist realism; through their artifice they draw attention to the marvels of growth and fruition in the natural world.

The works presented in this retrospective demonstrate how she staged a series of radical interventions in her adaptation of craft and her approach to modernism. Her forms and concepts transgress art-historical categories. Imbued with a powerful, contemporary ethos, her sculptures bask in undoing the distinction between the traditional and the modern.

The genesis of Mukherjee's appreciation for the natural world can be traced to a childhood divided between the picturesque foothills of the Himalayas and the flat, rugged landscape of Santiniketan, West Bengal. Her artist parents were very conscious of nature, especially her father, Benode Behari Mukherjee, who imbibed an ecological philosophy from studying at Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan (founded by the polymath Rabindranath Tagore), where he subsequently taught.

Mukherjee enrolled at the age of sixteen at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda (now Vadodara), where she earned a diploma in painting in 1970. She then studied mural design under her father's former student K. G. Subramanyan, who advocated for his students to engage with the entire spectrum of historically Indian artistic and craft traditions and encouraged the use of unconventional materials and techniques.

Mukherjee's attraction to fiber was, above all, a personal choice. Her earliest works were wall hangings evocative of scenery or flowering-vine species she found appealing. From these, knotting emerged as her primary gesture; she did not work with a conventional loom and instead used makeshift frames and armatures. Mukherjee also preferred working with a natural rope known in India as San or Shani, describing it as "something close to hemp. . . . I don't know whether it is flax, but it is not jute. Maybe it is something in-between."

## 1 *Squirrel*, 1972

Hemp, jute, cotton,  
sisal, bamboo, and  
carpet brushes

Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

Mukherjee's earliest fiber works can best be classified as wall hangings that explore a range of plant forms and other elements seen in nature. The three-dimensionality of *Squirrel*, a bricoleur creature with a carpet-brush body and crocheted head, marks a shift in her wall-based work. The form of the squirrel, which hangs by its tail from a net of loose jute, appears to emerge from a knitted backdrop. As Mukherjee's first animal form, *Squirrel* anticipates her later fiber monoliths, which exist somewhere between the realms of plant and creature.

## 2 *Waterfall*, 1975

Hemp and cotton

National Gallery of  
Modern Art, New Delhi

In 1972 Mukherjee relocated to Nizamuddin East, in New Delhi. Though her connection to the neighborhood's community of designers, architects, artists, and journalists had an influence on her aesthetic sensibility, she was steadfast in repudiating design work, and fully invested in situating her woven forms as sculpture. Her close friendship with the artist and critic Jagdish Swaminathan can be partially credited for the turn her practice took at this juncture toward metaphor while retaining the art-crafts ideology of Subramanyan.

Mukherjee began to explore the fundamental elements of traditional sculpture—volume, space, balance, weight, and shape—and accepted large-scale public commissions. Working intuitively and without preparatory drawings or sketches, she took her works off the wall so that they could interact with the floor and space around them; eventually, she suspended them from the ceiling. Less obviously plant or creature, these now-biomorphic objects signified states of metamorphosis and transfiguration.

The mostly Sanskrit titles from this period identify the works as personifications of deities and divinities drawn from Indian mythology. Representations of these nymphs and forest spirits form part of the traditional iconography that Mukherjee observed at large temples and roadside shrines during her frequent travels across the country. Many of her sculptures that project from the wall are reminiscent of temple bas-reliefs, yet her evocation of such iconography is interpretative rather than imitative and transforms the classical into modernist abstractions.

3 *Black Formation II*,  
1977

Fiber

Collection of Lis and  
Leif Faurholt

4 *Nag Devta*  
(*Serpent Deity*),  
1979

Fiber

Private collection

The sculpture *Nag Devta* is reminiscent of the ubiquitous serpent deity found in Indian shrines and temples; the portion attached to the wall suggests the snake's poised hood and the trail on the floor its coiled tail. Here, Mukherjee distilled the vocabularies of Indian stone and bas-relief sculpture into a patterned, symmetrical, and thoroughly modern form that speaks to her interest in representing sexual difference. Abounding with fecundity and vitality, the piece comingles male and female sexual attributes in a single form, whose sensuous bends and folds envelop a phallus shape.

5 *Black Devi*  
(*Black Goddess*),  
1980

Fiber

Roopankar Museum  
of Fine Arts, Bharat  
Bhavan, Bhopal

9 *Pari (Nymph)*,  
1986

Fiber

Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

6 *Sitting Deity*,  
1981

Fiber

Roopankar Museum  
of Fine Arts, Bharat  
Bhavan, Bhopal

10 *Apsara*  
(*Celestial Nymph*),  
1985

Fiber

Collection of Forum  
and Ajoy Kapoor

7 *Purush*  
(*Absolute Force*),  
1980

Fiber

Roopankar Museum  
of Fine Arts, Bharat  
Bhavan, Bhopal

11 *Sri (Deity)*,  
1982

Fiber

Private collection

8 *Yogini*  
(*Female Seeker*),  
1986

Fiber

Roopankar Museum  
of Fine Arts, Bharat  
Bhavan, Bhopal

In the 1980s Mukherjee embarked on a group of sculptures that were daring and monumental, marking the most ambitious phase in her use of fiber. Leaving behind a conventional approach to display, Mukherjee rejected pedestals and put her sculptures in contact with the floor. Standing upright, these works are imposing yet do not resist gravity. They achieve her desire to convey “the feeling of awe [you get] when you walk into the small sanctum of a temple and look up to be held by an iconic presence.”

To realize sculptures of such scale was demanding, and Mukherjee was aided by her then-husband, Ranjit Singh, and assistant, Budhia. Preparing the ropes, which she sourced locally, was time-consuming. They came packed in bundles that had to be uncoiled, straightened, and separated according to color and thickness. Strands of uniform color were used as they were; others were dyed chemically.

Despite Mukherjee’s allusions to iconographic imagery, she remained formally in conversation with modernism. She worked in a single medium, used an economy of means, and maintained balance through symmetrical mirroring. At the same time, she clarified that she used modernism for her “own needs, in [her] particular context . . . neither out of ideological preference, nor in opposition to Western modernist values.”

12 *Van Raja I (King of the Forest)*, 1981

Fiber

Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal

13 *Basanti (She of Spring)*, 1984

Fiber

National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

14 *Yakshi (Female Forest Deity)*, 1984

Fiber

Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, and acquired through the generosity of Marlene Hess and James D. Zirin and the Modern Women's Fund, 2017

(On view until August 2019)

15 *Pakshi (Bird)*, 1985

Fiber

Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), Bangalore

16 *Rudra (Deity of Terror)*, 1982

Fiber

National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

The imposing, purple-hued *Rudra* refers to the deity in the sacred Indian text *Rig Veda* who is a personification of terror. Mukherjee was not timid about pushing her works into the realm of the frightening to achieve a sense of awe in her viewers. Along with classical iconography, she cited performance cultures such as Theyam and Kathkali, from India, and Noh and Kabuki, from Japan, as stimuli for her sculptures. *Rudra*'s central cavity fans out symmetrically and extends into long tassels that reach the ground. The work suggests the artifice of theatrical costumes used by performers to project reverence, mixed with fear, to their audiences.

17 *Devi (Goddess)*, 1982

Fiber

National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

By the end of the 1980s, Mukherjee fully liberated her forms from the wall and ceiling to make freestanding sculptures. Her solo show at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, in 1994 marked the culmination of her fiber practice. While the exhibition received critical notice in the British press, some reviews were culturally reductive and did not account for Mukherjee's artistic agency in her interpretation of iconography. Mukherjee asserted in response, "my idea of the sacred is not rooted in any specific culture . . . my work is not . . . the iconic representation of any particular religious belief, rather it is the metamorphosed expression of varied sensory perceptions." Her "anthropomorphic deities," she clarified, "have no relationship to gods and goddesses in the traditional iconographic sense, but are parallel invocations in the realm of art."

In the second half of the 1990s, Mukherjee's output of fiber sculptures gradually diminished. Figural elements disappeared totally and, after she made a final group of unabashedly sexual works, she stopped working with fiber entirely. She had become hindered by a number of factors: working with fiber was physically demanding, the rope Mukherjee used was now being combined with synthetic fibers, and a ban was imposed on the dyeing units needed to achieve her preferred colors.

18 *Woman on Peacock*,  
1991

Fiber

Foundation of Contemporary Art,  
Reunion Island

As Mukherjee's first fully freestanding work as well as her most figural in profile, *Woman on Peacock* is a consummate example of her singular treatment of conventional iconography. By depicting a woman astride a male form, the artist both fused human and animal worlds and explored sexuality. Concerning her choice of composition, Mukherjee stated that the figure's stance was "not only adopted by male gods; female goddesses also have *Vahans* (vehicles). It is maybe an idiosyncrasy, to be avoided in iconic art, but it demonstrates the possibility of playfulness in the realm of personal mythology."

19 *Pushp (Flower)*,  
1993

Fiber

Collection of Shalini and Vivek Gupta

*Pushp* inaugurates a series of freestanding works—inspired by a burgeoning magnolia flower—that are unmistakable evocations of female genitalia. There is a languorous and suggestive quality to *Pushp*; seen frontally, it seems to be on the precipice of unfurling. Unquestionably erotic, Mukherjee's depictions of sexuality are compelling for their focus on the potentiality, not culmination, of pleasure. Her works undulate, swell, surge, and ripple, leading not to the ecstasy of climax but to the interplay of union and division.

20 *Vanshri (Woman and Tree)*,  
1994

Fiber

Collection of Jayshree Bhartia

21 *Lotus Pond*,  
1995

Stoneware

Vadehra Art Gallery,  
New Delhi

*Lotus Pond* is a sprawling work made up of thirteen terracotta components whose shifting earth tones, achieved with differing kiln temperatures, recall those of unglazed vessels by Indian potters. As with her earliest fiber sculptures, Mukherjee drew on imagery of blooms and blossoms. Some of her "lotuses" feature open mouths, gaping buds, and fronds with pouting lips, while others are covered with twirling, petal-like foliage. Originally presented on a red sandstone structure, together the pieces evoke a lotus pond crowded with flora in varying phases of efflorescence.

22 *Van Shringar  
(Forest Ornament)*,  
1992

Fiber

Collection of Anurag Saraf

As Mukherjee's production of fiber works decreased, she turned to ceramic. This exploration was first made possible in 1995, when she participated in a workshop at Anandgram, New Delhi, organized by the Foundation of Indian Artists in collaboration with Sanskriti Pratishthan.

Unlike knotting rope, which was pliable while still allowing for control of the work's form, handling malleable clay required Mukherjee's immediate reactivity. Still, she did not view her transition to other media as a rupture from fiber, but rather as a continuation of her process of using natural materials. Employing an underform—a dome shape taken from an inverted terracotta pot—as a base, she worked additively by layering individual slabs of clay. Her considered use of contrasting glazes enlivened the ceramic works and heightened their artifice.

Mukherjee continued with these experiments in ceramic during two residencies at the European Ceramic Work Centre in 's-Hertogenbosch (now known as Oisterwijk) in the Netherlands, in 1996 and 2000. The facilities gave Mukherjee the opportunity to bring to ceramic the same degree of ambition that she had exercised in her mature fiber sculptures.

23 *Florescence I*,  
1996

Ceramic  
DAG, New Delhi

25 *Florescence II*,  
1996

Ceramic  
DAG, New Delhi

24 *Earth Bloom*,  
1996

Ceramic  
DAG, New Delhi

As her proficiency in ceramic grew, Mukherjee amplified her smaller flowerets into this menacing trio. In the tumescent *Earth Bloom*, she grafted smaller, amputated versions of the base dome onto her original underform to arrive at swollen, slightly deformed breasts and bellies. She made the bristly twin *Florescences* into seething, convulsing, unruly vegetal forms. Despite being warned against chromium oxide for both its toxicity and unpredictability, Mukherjee opted to use this unstable glaze. Its resulting oranges, yellows, and greens give the works a pernicious sheen, evocative of threats found in the natural environment.

26 *Van Raja II*  
(*King of the Forest*),  
1991–94

Fiber  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

27 *Night Bloom I*,  
1999–2000

Ceramic  
Galerie Mirchandani  
+ Steinruecke

29 *Night Bloom VI*,  
1999–2000

Ceramic  
Collection of Gaurav  
and Aarti Sekhri, Kapil  
and Puja Sekhri

28 *Night Bloom IV*,  
1999–2000

Ceramic  
Collection of  
Jayshree Bhartia

30 *Night Bloom III*,  
1999–2000

Ceramic  
The Park Hotels, India

Not unlike her earlier quasi-figural work in fiber, Mukherjee's *Night Bloom* series is reminiscent of icons being reclaimed by vines, such as the seated bodhisattvas in the tangle of vegetation at the temples of Angkor Wat, Cambodia. While more legibly human than her fiber pieces—*Night Bloom VI* has visible breasts—the series goes beyond imitating classical stone divinities, braiding the human and the vegetal together in a single form. In her largest ceramic works, Mukherjee fixated on ornament as an enticing but also invasive and darkly sensual element that repeats across and unifies the group.

Mukherjee's lack of access to large kilns and specific glazes in India deterred her from further explorations in ceramics, and in the early 2000s she started working with bronze. While Subramanyan, Swaminathan, and her father are always cited in discussions of her practice, Mukherjee almost certainly chose the medium from having watched her mother, Leela Mukherjee, model and cast small sculptures in bronze. Assisted by the sculptor-casters Balkrishna and Pankaj Guru, Mukherjee sculpted in the lost-wax technique. Without the control offered by rope, she had to adapt to the transmuted forms that emerged from the fire. Unusually, she foraged tools from the neighborhood orthodontist's laboratory to finish the surfaces of her cast works.

Mukherjee's bronzes capture a paradoxical sense of stasis and growth. Her preoccupation with the alchemy of the lost-wax process echoes her interest in the fundamental forces of life creation. Her honed terrains and membranes emerge from casting scorched and marred. These patterned surfaces insinuate bas-relief yet they manifest in amorphous, nebulous pieces that seem to splutter and develop into grasping, wanton, primeval creatures. These sculptures appear to simultaneously decompose and become, carrying intimations of mortality and entropy.

31 *Palmscape I*,  
2013  
Bronze  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

32 *Palmscape III*,  
2013  
Bronze  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

33 *Palmscape IV*,  
2013  
Bronze  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

*Palmscape*, Mukherjee's final series, represents her apotheosis in bronze. She cast each of the sculptures from plant fragments collected mostly around New Delhi. Although her paradoxically leafy scapes resemble palm fronds, they are, in fact, firmly an invented species. In a stunning reversal of the ponderous weight of her fiber sculptures, Mukherjee's bronzes appear not to wrestle with gravity at all. Marvelously engineered, they are cast in arrested movement. Each also has a furtive anatomy—for example, *Palmscape I* contorts like a serpent while *Palmscape II* is coiled like a scorpion—that endows it with, at times, a sinister and baleful temperament. Mukherjee completed her last work, *Palmscape IX* (on view in the concluding section), in the weeks leading up to her death.

34 *Palmscape VII*,  
2013  
Bronze  
Collection of  
Aruna Advani

35 *Palmscape II*,  
2013  
Bronze  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

36 *Mound I*,  
2009  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee  
Foundation

37 *Mound III*,  
2009  
Bronze  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

38 *Outcrop II*,  
2007–8  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee  
Foundation

39 *Outcrop IV*,  
2007–8  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee  
Foundation

40 *Outcrop V*,  
2007–8  
Bronze  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

41 *Outcrop VI*,  
2007–8  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee  
Foundation

42 *Outcrop IX*,  
2007–8  
Bronze  
Kiran Nadar Museum  
of Art, New Delhi

43 *Jamuni*  
(*Purple Flower*),  
2000  
Hemp  
Collection of  
Rajiv Saini



While Mukherjee belongs to a broad lineage of Western and non-Western artists for whom nature has served as inspiration, her aesthetic exploration was never romantic, reactionary, or elegiac. Instead, she saw nature as alive, fertile, and eroticized.

Stimulated by the wild, proliferating energy of plant life, Mukherjee engendered monoliths reminiscent of totems. Her extravagant and inventive iconography communicates irrepressible growth that is both fabulous and terrifying: for example, a creeper coils itself around a trunklike base and a flower unfolds while natural elements sprout into appendages and protuberances. The saturated, vibrant colors and tactile surface treatments that she used across her media also heighten the sense of a vital life force.

Throughout her career, Mukherjee created diverse forms that reverberate off one another. Her works highlight phenomenal forces of nature—lush, blooming, and fragrant—that eventually transform into a darker register linked to the natural life cycle's decay, deterioration, and death. Mukherjee's sculptures challenge the imagination to go beyond logic and reason and enter into a world that is teeming and full of potential.

- 44 *Adi Pushp II (Primal Flower)*, 1998–99  
Fiber  
Collection of Amrita Jhaveri
- 45 *Orange & Green*, 2000  
Ceramic  
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi
- 46 *Blue Work I*, 2000  
Ceramic  
Collection of Amrita Jhaveri
- 47 *Wing II*, 2008  
Bronze  
Private collection
- 48 *Memorial II*, 2006  
Bronze  
Vadhra Art Gallery, New Delhi
- 49 *Cluster V*, 2008  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation
- 50 *Palmscape IX*, 2015  
Bronze  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
- 51 *Leaf Totem II*, 1996  
Ceramic  
Intended Gift of the Estate of Mrinalini Mukherjee
- 52 *Vriksh–Nata (Arboreal Enactment)*, 1991–92  
Fiber  
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi
- 53 *Aranyani (Goddess of the Forests)*, 1996  
Fiber  
Intended Gift of the Estate of Mrinalini Mukherjee
- 54 *Cluster IV*, 2008  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation
- 55 *Cluster III*, 2008  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation
- 56 *Cluster VI*, 2008  
Bronze  
Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation
- 57 *Untitled*, 2002  
Ceramic  
Private collection

This guide accompanies the exhibition "Phenomenal Nature: Mrinalini Mukherjee," on view at The Met Breuer from June 4 to September 29, 2019.

All works in the exhibition are by Mrinalini Mukherjee (Indian, 1949–2015).

#MrinaliniMukherjee

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